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Ron Beadle

Why Business Cannot Be a Practice

Abstract: In a series of papers Geoff Moore has applied Alasdair MacIntyre's much cited work to generate a virtue-based business ethics. Central to this project is Moore's argument that business falls under MacIntyre's concept of 'practice'. This move attempts to overcome MacIntyre's reputation for being 'anti-business' while maintaining his framework for evaluating social action and replaces MacIntyre's hostility to management with a conception of managers as institutional practitioners (craftsmen). I argue however that this move has not been justified. Given the importance MacIntyre places on the protection of practices, the result is that much of Moore's contribution is misplaced. Business cannot name a practice but business institutions certainly do house practices. The task then is to try to understand the circumstances under which practices might flourish and those under which they might founder in a business context. This is not aided by Moore's redescription of all businesses as practices.

0. Introduction

Despite Knight's characterisation of attempts to apply MacIntyre's work to corporate management as 'paradoxical' (1998, 283), business ethicists and organisational scholars have persisted in this attempt. Within business ethics the literature specifically interpreting MacIntyre's work stretches back some years (McCann/Brownsberger 1990; Hovarth 1995; Mintz 1996; Dobson 1996, 1997, 2001; Wicks 1996, 1997; Brewer 1997; Collier 1998; Dawson/Bartholomew 2003) and references are so common as to be de rigueur in contemporary considerations of virtue ethics (Crocket 2005; Whetstone 2005; Jones et al 2005; Weaver 2006) and Aristotelian organisation theory (Tsoukas/Cummings 1997).

My purpose here is to consider Moore's use of the work of MacIntyre in three recent papers in *Business Ethics Quarterly* (Moore 2002, 2005a, 2005b). Moore's project is distinctive¹ in at least three respects. First it is a sustained and cumulative attempt to apply and critique MacIntyre's ideas in the context of business ethics when most other contributions are single efforts. Second Moore uses MacIntyre's goods-virtues-practices-institutions schema whilst rejecting MacIntyre's 'pessimistic' view of business through redefining business as a practice. Third Moore's purpose in applying this framework is both analytical and

¹ I cannot establish these distinctions individually or serially without fully reviewing the other extant literature but that is not the task of this paper. In the absence of that, others can judge the veracity of this claim.

practical, his proposals to change the perceptions of agents in respect of both the corporations they work for and their own agency (as craftsmen²) directs itself towards the extension of virtuous practices and not simply to their consideration. These elements separately and serially mark out Moore's contribution so far.

In this paper however I shall argue that Moore's attribution of the status of 'practice' to business fails. Given the importance MacIntyre places on the protection of practices from the invidious ambitions of institutions, the result is that much of Moore's contribution is misplaced. Moore's work needs to be re-cast in order to rescue the valuable contribution it could make from the error that undermines it. Hence the purpose of this paper is to save Moore from himself.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it summarises MacIntyre's goods-virtues-practices-institutions schema. Second, it shows how Moore's papers (2002, 2005a, 2005b) support, extend and critique the schema. Third, it will argue that Moore's attribution of the status of a practice (within MacIntyre's schema) to business is unjustified. It concludes that Moore's contribution in respect of 'corporate character' and 'craftsmanship' can survive the rejection of his attribution of the status of 'practice' to business and form part of a coherent use of MacIntyre's work.

1. MacIntyre's General Theory

MacIntyre's 'general theory' (Moore/Beadle 2006) of goods, virtues, practices and institutions posits a series of relationships between agents and structures in which the development of virtues is seen as both dependent upon and potentially undermined by the institutions which house social practices and create goods. It is worth noting at the outset that MacIntyre's use of these concepts is largely but not wholly consistent with common usage. In this paper his definitions will only be deployed where their distinctiveness from common usage are critical to the argument.

What then is this argument? Pared down to its essence MacIntyre holds that the importance of the virtues to the successful conduct of a human life (a claim involving a variety of contentions which it is not my purpose here to explore) first becomes apparent to agents through participation in practices. For example in the traditional circus (Beadle 2003; Beadle/Konyot 2006), an acrobat may develop her awareness of the virtue of constancy from recognizing the importance to the successful completion of her performance of the participation of a catcher whose role requires consistent alertness, flexibility and judgment. An inadequate catcher risks the limbs and sometimes the life of the acrobat. Where the catcher is training an acrobat their constancy may even be expressed in the practically wise judgment that they should allow their apprentice to sustain (avoidable) minor injuries so that the acrobat may understand the more significant risk that

² Moore considers the gendering of the concept of 'craftsmanship' but rejects the neutral 'craftspersonship' on aesthetic grounds (Moore 2005a, 247).

they run should they mis-time or otherwise fail to properly exercise a routine in performance.³

Successful performance within practices is revealed to agents as a good but one intelligible only within the practice of which it forms a part. A triple summersault, the hallmark of successful performance in trapeze is intelligible as a good only within the context of the practice of a particular type of artistic display—the effort and risk required to develop and sustain such performance is unintelligible outside of such a context. Thus amongst the essential aspects of the definition of a practice is the generation of goods internal to such practices (MacIntyre 1985, 189–190; 1994, 284).

Inasmuch as internal goods share a symbiotic relation with practices so practices share such a relation with institutions. For according to MacIntyre no practice can survive or flourish outside of some relatively permanent institutional structure. The resources required to sustain and improve the practice of acrobatics requires inter alia institutions such as gymnastic clubs and circuses to house and allocate resources to practitioners and to do this requires different goods, not generated through any particular practice but required by all practices. MacIntyre refers to these as “external goods” (MacIntyre 1985, 190–191) with prestige, status, power and money being its principal types (197).

The relationship of practices to institutions is central to MacIntyre’s social theory:

“Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question—that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential feature of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.” (MacIntyre 1985, 194)

The virtues are therefore not only critical to the generation of goods internal to practices and in turn to the leading of a good life but also to the maintenance of institutions which hold the generation of internal and external goods in the kind of balance that enables the flourishing of both:

“the making and sustaining of forms of human community—and therefore of institutions—itself has all the characteristics of a practice, and moreover of a practice which stands in a peculiarly close relationship to the exercise of the virtues [...]” (MacIntyre 1985, 194, emphasis added).

It is to the characterization of this practice of the making and sustaining of such institution that Moore’s papers (2002, 2005a, 2005b) are directed and it is with the adequacy of this characterization that this paper is concerned.

³ Circus performers have provided this example in the course of other research.

2. Moore's Project

Moore describes these papers (2002, 2005a, 2005b) as forming a developed argument (2005b, 659) in which MacIntyre's goods-virtues-practices-institutions schema is deployed within rather than in opposition to business ethics. His argument can be summarised as follows:

1. business is a practice (in MacIntyre's sense)
2. as other practices, business can be undermined by institutions
3. the special function of management is to protect the practice of business from the corporatist and capitalist form of institutions

Let us consider these claims seriatim.

1. *Business is a Practice*

For Moore, business is a practice under MacIntyre's definition of practice as:

“Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” (MacIntyre 1985, 187)

Moore maintains that because MacIntyre has described ‘productive crafts’ as examples of practices and because business can itself be described as a productive craft, “it follows from this that business, as a productive activity, may be redescribed as a practice” (Moore 2002, 23) and to confirm the scope of this identification Moore asserts that “each and every” (23) business falls into the definition.

Despite his assertion that business “as with any practice, rewards those who possess and exercise the virtues” (25) Moore gives no example of the excellences of business qua business save that of “customer service” (25). The other internal goods he highlights: “quality” (25) and “the exercise of practical skills, the stimulation that the competitive situation affords, pride in accomplishment and the personal dignity that derives from a job well done” (Moore 2005b, 660) are generic descriptors equally applicable to other practices. Similarly he provides no definition or example of business qua business and refers to “the business of fishing, retailing, building or whatever” (Moore 2002, 25). The absence of a definition or examples of ‘business qua business’ and the associated limitations of the specific excellences of such provides a clue to the frailty of this contention.

2. As Other Practices, Business Can Be Undermined by Institutions

Having made the case for business as practice it is merely a matter of further deduction for Moore to demonstrate that this is subject to the same risks of institutional corruption as other practices. Business practitioners suffer the “ethical schizophrenia” that results because “the practice of business is often valued for its external goods” (25) and “the fundamental challenge” (2005b, 675) facing corporations is to resist the corruption emanating from the institution of “the corporation and the wider capitalist system” (Moore 2002, 26–27).

3. The Special Function of Management is to Protect the Practice of Business from the Corrupting Power of the Corporate and Capitalist Form of Institutions

MacIntyre’s own characterisation of management is unequivocally negative. He makes four distinctive and inter-related claims (Beadle 2002). First, that the character of the manager eschews any substantive notion of the good. Second, that the manager’s role is to deploy supposedly impersonal facts in pursuit of the most effective and efficient means to achieve any prescribed ends but thirdly that the sort of morally neutral knowledge required to achieve such manipulation does not exist and finally that managers themselves inhabit in a deep personal compartmentalization without which their social role could not be understood.

We need not examine these claims in detail to recognise how different Moore’s characterisation becomes when business is itself seen as a practice. The villains can become heroes. Moore argues that the governance of institutions should have the maintenance of the practice as its principal and ongoing concern and that this indeed constitutes the particular practice of managers who have “in one sense, outgrown the practice and now represent the institution that houses it” (Moore 2005b, 663).

Managers are thus required to be the protectors of the virtues of the practice of business: “The task of creating the virtuous corporation is essentially managerial.” (Moore 2005b, 677) What is required to achieve the self-understanding necessary for the performance of this role is a concept of craftsmanship in which managers see themselves principally as practitioners of the craft [of business]. Moreover such understanding will form part of the individual manager’s life-purpose, their telos and the pursuit of the practice will frame their distinctive narrative quest for the good:

“If they then endeavour to maintain an integrity of character by exercising the virtues, gaining such internal goods as are available, thereby helping them in their narrative quest towards their own telos, then not only would the individuals benefit but they would, in the very act of doing all of this, play a necessary part in the humanizing of business from within.” (Moore 2005a, 249)

Moore presents a variety of examples (in 2005b) to illustrate the characteristics

required by such a virtuous manager and, given the intimacy of the relationship between individual and institutional action (for both MacIntyre and Moore) makes a convincing case to relate the prospects for such virtuous managers to institutional characteristics. Virtuous businesses so informed would have not only culture but more importantly (and conceptually distinctive) a ‘corporate character’ in which the claims of internal and external goods were balanced over the long term:

“A virtuous corporate character is the seat of the virtues necessary for a corporation to engage in practices with excellence, focusing on those internal goods thereby obtainable, while warding off threats from its own inordinate pursuit of external goods and from the corrupting power of those other institutions with which it engages.” (Moore 2005b, 661)

The prerequisites of such character require a just purpose for the institution, a power-balanced structure, systems and processes that encourage active reflection and a supportive culture (Moore 2005b, 675–677), propositions for which Moore offers a variety of arguments and illustrations.

3. Is Business a Practice?

It should be clear that the application of Moore’s case across businesses and hence potentially to all managers of businesses relies on the ‘redescription’ of business-as-practice. How is this claim supported? In a number of other papers claiming that some activity or other is a practice (Lambeth 1990 in respect of journalism, Sellman 2000 for nursing, Leeper/Leeper 2001 for public relations, and various chapters in Dunne/Hogan 2004 for teaching) inductive arguments describe internal goods unique to their respective activities in order to make the case that the activity is indeed a practice. However, Moore’s case cites no specific activities that are internal to business qua business. His argument (Moore 2002 and in abbreviated form in 2005a and 2005b) is a formal deduction (i.e. the conclusions follow from the definition of terms in the premises) as follows:

Premise 1. All productive crafts are practices

Premise 2. Business is a productive craft

Conclusion. Business is a practice

The central issue when considering the validity of claims of this type is whether the terms are appropriately defined. Moore’s failure to define business is therefore indefensible. The situation is worsened by Moore’s subsequent use of an extended list of examples: “the particular business may be fishing, or producing beef or milk, or building houses, or it may be financial services, or mining, or retailing” (Moore 2002, 23). This may mean either that the terms “business” and “productive craft” are synonyms or that every productive craft is also a business (albeit that they form a subset of all businesses) or that all businesses

are productive crafts but none of these relationships are formally stated and in consequence we do not know whether the claim here is analytic or synthetic although the structure of the argument is certainly the former.

Additionally the absence of any discussion of the relationship between business as an activity and ‘the business of’ as an institution is culpable given that Moore provides examples of both, though one explanation may be that the place of an institution in Moore’s schema has already been occupied by ‘capitalism’. Moore does however provide illustrations of the coherence and complexity of the productive crafts, specifically citing fishing and retailing (Moore 2002, 23–24). These are used to discriminate between practices and features of practices (and institutions) against an informal measure of coherence and complexity (24). None of this however supports the argument that business is itself a practice, it simply reinforces the case MacIntyre himself makes as to why the productive crafts that he cites (such as fishing) are requisitely coherent and complex to constitute a practice.

While Moore neither poses nor answers the question “what is business?” another business ethicist has recently suggested an answer (Kaler 2003). This account provides us with substantive reasons to set alongside the formal arguments above for rejecting Moore’s position. Kaler argues that the range of activities and modes of institutionalisation that fall under the rubric of business is such that their only common and hence definitive feature is that of having customers. All of the activities of business (accounting, investing, purchasing, marketing, employing) are conducted within other institutions (state agencies, voluntary bodies etc);—only the relation with customers is unique and hence definitive. Whereas Moore argues that “the practice of business is often valued for its external goods” (Moore 2002, 25), the implication of Kaler’s argument is that business qua business is uniquely and definitively constituted in relation to such goods. And here Kaler’s account ends.

However it is important to my argument that engagement with customers is predicated (not only but necessarily) on their ability to command sufficient resource to purchase one’s product, nursery school children know that Simple Simon couldn’t buy a pie because he forgot to bring a penny for the pieman. While Moore suggests that ‘customer service’ is one of the excellences required by businesses he does not draw out the implication (and this is part of where his disagreement with MacIntyre lies) that service, excellent or not, is only available to those who can pay.

It is no part of my argument to make any suggestion in respect of the ethics of the business-customer relationship but it is part of my argument to suggest that Moore’s case requires the description of the specific kind of life that business involves and the uniqueness of the goods internal to business that it generates. This he has not done. If the veracity of Kaler’s position is accepted then it is only in terms of having customers that business can find such internal goods and in terms of which such a case could be made. In all other respects the excellences that Moore points to are those unique to particular productive crafts—fishing, architecture, science and so on rather than of ‘the business of’ such crafts.

MacIntyre does not use the term “productive craft” rather than “business” by

accident, nor does he mean by “productive craft” whatever Moore might mean by “business”. As a fervent and continuing critic of capitalism whose sociology remains imbued by Marxism he has rarely even used the term “business” (one exception being his 1977 argument that “business executives” are compartmentalized emotivists (MacIntyre 1977, *passim*), another being his reference to a finding that 57% of “business students” admit to cheating in examinations (2006, 109). When he writes that “the needs of capital formation impose upon capitalists and upon those who manage their enterprises a need to extract from the work of their employees a surplus which is at the future deployment of capital and not of labor” (2006, 148) he is making no distinction between capitalism as a system and the enterprise such as Moore makes between capitalism and business. Rather the enterprise (the business) is the manifest institutional mode of capitalism.

In his critique of the institutional injustice of capitalism exemplified by its failure to allocate rewards justly (in contrast to Moore 2002, 25), its propensity to turn those subject to it to the vice of acquisitiveness (the determination to have what they want rather than what they deserve) and in his hostility towards the consumer society (*ibid passim* and see also MacIntyre 1999b) he condemns the very relationship which defines business.

If business is a practice then MacIntyre has defined practice in a way quite at odds with his own intent. He can only have done this if his definition is so imprecise as to rule in activities he would wish ruled out. In answering this charge I call in aid two papers. The first is an interview with MacIntyre by the educational philosopher Joseph Dunne (MacIntyre/Dunne 2004, 1–17) in which the status of teaching parallels the discussion here in respect to business. MacIntyre asserted in contradiction to many others (including both Dunne within the interview and Moore 2002, 21–22) that teaching is not a practice itself, because it is a feature of all practices, its very generality ruled it out of contention as a practice itself:

“for it is part of my claim that teaching is never more than a means, that it has no point and purpose except for the point and purpose of the activities to which it introduces students. All teaching is for the sake of something else and so teaching does not have its own goods. The life of a teacher is therefore not a specific kind of life. The life of a teacher of mathematics, whose goods are the goods of mathematics is one thing; a life of a teacher of music whose goods are the goods of music is another.” (MacIntyre/Dunne 2004, 8)

This argument applies equally to business (including Moore’s usages). In the same way that Moore refers to “the business off” followed by a list of examples (Moore 2002, 23) so, as we have seen, MacIntyre refers to “the teaching of” followed by examples to show that it is precisely because the formation of a sentence of this type is not only possible but essential to the definition of the activity under discussion, that this activity cannot describe a practice. The conduct of practices constitutes a ‘specific type of life’—that of a particular practice rather than an activity required within practices as such.

In order to make the case for business-as-practice Moore would at the very minimum needs to show that business is specific in a way that (say) teaching is not. To do this he would have to exemplify both the goods internal to business qua business and the specific type of life in which these goods form an essential element without reference to any of the particularities of the productive crafts he has so far cited as examples of businesses. Such a case would require application to “each and every business” (Moore 2002, 23) including inter alia the businesses of drug-dealing, prostitution, arms manufacture, money laundering and the like. Should the obstacles presented by this be overcome there is a further obstacle to face and this is apparent from the paper to which I now turn.

MacIntyre’s use of fishing crews as an example of practice was written in the context of MacIntyre’s acknowledged failure to provide sufficient examples of ‘productive crafts’ as practices in his work (MacIntyre 1994, 284) and to distinguish between such crafts and other practices such as those involving the arts, games and sports. The charge to which he was responding was that his definition of practice excluded productive activities defined as those generating products for use by others (Miller 1994). MacIntyre’s response in fact highlights the similarities between productive crafts when they are in good order and those arts, games and sciences which MacIntyre had used as examples of practice in *After Virtue*.

This contextualisation is relevant to this discussion for two reasons. First the practice of arts, sciences and games are themselves often housed within businesses, in the same way as productive crafts—for example ‘architecture’ are often (but not always) housed within businesses. Given this, Moore’s position could be extended to suggest that arts, sciences and games may be redescribed as businesses. Moore does not of course claim this and I would suggest for the good reason that the vacuity of such a redescription would be immediately apparent, yet this is an extension that could be made using the reasoning he employs. What distinguishes the productive crafts from others is not that the former are businesses. Second, MacIntyre’s response to Miller emphasises the particularity of individual practices; the practice of fishing, architecture, chess or whatever is a single activity with its own standards and not two conjoined practices being one of the above and that of business. Why is this important?

MacIntyre’s response to Miller contrasts two fishing crews whose over-riding purposes differ in respect of the goods they pursue. The crew pursuing external goods aims at wages for the crew and profit for the owners whereas the crew pursuing internal goods is devoted to the peculiar excellences required by the practice of fishing (MacIntyre 1994, 284–286). The first crew would abandon fishing should they find another way to generate increased income. The second crew however would subordinate these economic goods to an allegiance to the continuation of the practice of fishing and the way of life that entails. Whilst most discussion has centred on the prospects for the second crew within a market economy (Dobson 1996, 1997; Wicks 1996, 1997) the point here is the basis of the distinction drawn between the two crews in terms of purpose (and hence what counts within each crew as reasons for action) and the way of life that

manifests this purpose. For MacIntyre the second crew are practitioners and the first are not.

For Moore however the situation must be quite different. If Moore is correct and each and every business is a practice then the crew that abandons fishing simultaneously maintains and abjures its commitment to practice by remaining in business (a practice) and abjuring fishing (another practice). That this is incoherent and that it follows from Moore's position, is evident. The coherence of MacIntyre's definition of practice would be undermined if the same set of practitioners can coherently simultaneously engage in two practices. They cannot. It follows that either the practice of fishing is a practice in which case MacIntyre's example effectively discriminates between practitioners and non-practitioners (as was his purpose) or the practice is that of business in which case there is no discrimination between the two crews and MacIntyre's example fails. On this basis I maintain that one has to choose between Moore's 'business-as-practice' and MacIntyre's conception of practice but given that Moore's case that business is a practice is of interest only to the extent that MacIntyre's definition of practice is coherent, the choice is clear.

Having rejected Moore's understanding of business as practice, how should we understand business within MacIntyre's schema? A case may be made for understanding business in MacIntyre's terms in one of two ways. First business could be seen as a mode of institutionalisation whose definition involves a particular vulnerability (this puts it mildly) to corrupting the practices it houses consequent upon its focus on external goods. Indeed in later collaborative work Moore refers to business organisations "as a particular form of institution" (Moore/Beadle 2006, 374) suggesting precisely this definition. Such an understanding rejects Moore's distinction between 'business' and 'capitalism' but regards them as defining the institutional and systemic modes of the same phenomenon.

Second, business may be the feature of the life of all practices (and not just productive crafts) concerned with their relation to customers in a market where such a relation exists. For example MacIntyre has written favourably of pre-modern societies in which "markets are auxiliary to production that is not primarily for the market, but for local need, so that markets provide a useful means of exchange for what is surplus to local need, a means whereby all those who participate in them benefit" (2006, 148) the final condition, that of the common good, being subsequently contrasted with markets of modern capitalism which are "imposed both on labor and on small producers rather than in any sense freely chosen" (149). The notable point here is that again in contradistinction to Moore the basic model is of productive crafts for which markets are at most auxiliary—and hence productive crafts that cannot be described meaningfully as businesses except in the particular institutional setting of corporate modernity.

4. Conclusion

On the first page of the first of the three papers considered here Moore describes MacIntyre as "his own worst enemy" (2002, 19) in respect of being anti-

modernity, anti-business and anti-managerial. Moore's project of applying MacIntyre's schema to business may be seen as an attempt to overcome the obstacles that MacIntyre himself presents to this. However this paper has argued that his attempt to apply MacIntyre's concept of practice directly to business is deeply incoherent.

Moore's argument that the protection of practices requires practitioners to understand themselves as craftsman and institutions to develop particular 'characters' can easily survive the abandonment of 'business-as-practice'. To understand why some institutions (even for MacIntyre) have in fact protected the practices that they house while others do not requires an analytical schema identifying individual, institutional and environmental level factors (Moore/Beadle 2006) which must deploy distinctions around issues of craft and character such as those MacIntyre himself deploys in his description of fishing crews. For MacIntyre neither agency nor structure should be sacrificed in the attempt to understand social phenomena.

By way of illustration we can recall the old joke about an MBA graduate who becomes a consultant to a Philharmonic Orchestra, the punch-line to which is that within weeks the orchestra had been down-sized to a synthesiser. As someone who was not a craftsman one of the things that the fabled MBA holder failed to understand was the intimate relationship between the generation of external goods (i.e. ticket sales for the performances of the orchestra) and the internal goods to whose generation the audience wishes to be witness.

Performing arts and service industries share environmental features more conducive to craftsmanship than those of manufacturing and processing industries because the former do not allow for the same commercial opportunities to be realised through the substitution of capital for labour as the latter, a point of particular importance given the role of the effects of the need for capital formation in MacIntyre's condemnations of the injustices of capitalism (2006, 147–148).

It is in arguments such as this, that posit the circumstances in which markets reward and those in which (as MacIntyre maintains) they disregard the virtues of practitioners that a fruitful application of MacIntyre's framework to organisations lies. This may suggest to us a number of ways in which the business ethics and organization theory literatures might come together in describing the activity of managers quite differently according to whether or not the activities they manage might be meaningfully described as practices. The redescription of all businesses as practices is not only incoherent but probative to the development of such understanding.

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